

Christmas Gifts

THE STORY OF A YULETIDE OFFERING THAT WENT ASTRAY,
BUT MANAGED TO FIND A WELCOME AMONG STRANGERS

By Margaret Busbee Shipp

"**S**HALL I write Nell and Jerry about the way we searched for their vase?" Mrs. Clinton asked her husband.

"It would be a running account of the trip, wouldn't it, Jean?" he questioned in his turn. "I'll make an affidavit that you ransacked Persia, Egypt, and Greece; that you merely glanced at the Sphinx in passing, and hastily snatched up a carpet in Bagdad—but the greater part of the time was given to hunting a vase for Nell."

"And, after all, I found it in Paris at our same faithful dealer's. I know the price was a wicked extravagance, but one can't measure line and color by dollars and cents." Her radiance clouded somewhat.

"Do you think Nell will love it enough?" Jean demanded. "Perhaps I had better tell the dear child how beautiful it is, in case she doesn't recognize it for herself. She's such an earnest young thing, and she has faith in my taste. There had to be something very choice on that queer mantelpiece of hers; it demanded the unusual."

Clinton had not seen the house which his wife's niece had recently acquired, but he had been told all about the mantelpiece in the room which had been the parlor when the house was built. The mantelpiece was high, and the shelf narrow, and in the center there was a niche. Evidently it had been made for some highly prized object, so that no careless hand would be apt to knock it off.

When Mrs. Clinton saw it she said at once:

"Now, Nell, this room depends on what is put in that niche. The light from the window falls directly on it. The mantel is really at a skillful height, because the eyes focus there."

"What in the world would you suggest, Aunt Jean?" Nell asked. "We're fright-

fully cramped for money just now, after buying this place. Jerry's great-uncle built it nearly a hundred years ago, and it was sold out of the family after his death. When Jerry had a chance to buy it back he jumped at it. It really makes a wonderful place for him to write nine months out of the year, and then we can go to the city for the winter. We both adore fixing it up. But that niche gets the best of us. It's like a dead eye. My Sheffield vase didn't look right in it, somehow."

Mrs. Clinton shivered at the idea.

"I'll *think*," she said significantly.

Nell was quite content to let it go at that. Her aunt had motored to the New England village to say good-bye to her before starting on a trip around the world, and from happy experience, Nell had learned that Aunt Jean's thoughts were delightfully productive of gifts.

Mrs. Clinton had been surprised herself to realize how difficult it was to find the unique and flawless thing which was to crystallize the beauty of that austere room. Although she had picked up a possibility or two, she had never felt satisfied until she reached Paris, and the old dealer, with whom she had dealt for years, had called to see her about a small but precious collection of art treasures.

Jean Clinton knew her search was ended the moment her eyes rested on the exquisite vase, with its dignity of line, its rich turquoise glaze, its delicately patterned arabesques.

When she drove back to the hotel with her treasure, she did not dare trust it to a steamer trunk or even to a suit case handled by a porter. Wrapping it carefully in a soft silk negligee, she carried it herself in a bag which she would not allow any one else to touch. The cynical French porter

and the sophisticated steward alike thought it must be a bottle of very rare vintage.

The customs man was not particularly agreeable about her purchase when she reached New York, for when she showed the receipted bill, he sagely concluded that if she admitted that much, more must be concealed. There was quite a delay before he grudgingly accepted her statement, so the Clintons missed the train they hoped to take, and dined at home that night at ten instead of seven. But minor discomforts were not to be considered when the precious vase was safe across the sea at last.

As they sat before an open fire, with the delicious sense of being at home in time for Christmas, Mrs. Clinton put the vase on a table near them and watched the play of firelight on the luster of the arabesque decorations, iridescent gold, green, purple, ruby. Her eyes delighted in it.

"Just this one night I'll keep it here," Jean said. "If I looked at it two nights I simply couldn't give it to Nell. I'm only human!"

II

THE next morning she unpacked a portrait which had been sent away in her absence to be cleaned and varnished. It had been returned so well packed that she decided to use the same folds of excelsior around the vase.

Deftly she wrapped it up, first in tissue, then in soft old silk, then felt, and last the excelsior. Winters, the old butler, murmured deferentially that it was a better job than a professional packer could make.

"Take it out in the kitchen, now, Winters, and get that wooden box in the attic closet to put it in," Mrs. Clinton commanded. "You can use the rest of the excelsior to stuff in the corners."

Winters departed, depositing it all on the kitchen table while he went to get the box. On the way back, Mrs. Clinton stopped him to hang the portrait—and while he had the stepladder he might as well adjust the shades. Naturally there were many things to be done when the house had been closed for months.

Then Winters went to pack the vase, and returned at once to ask his mistress where she had put it. It was gone!

Foreboding knocking at her heart, Mrs. Clinton hurried to the kitchen to question her colored cook.

"Lawdy, Mis' Jeannie, you don't mean dat 'celsior trash? Wintuhs come in and dump it down on de table Ah jes' had washed—his ole packin' trash—and de trash man he come in dat same minit, and Ah give it ter him, and he dump it in wid de garbidge, and it's done gone on de trash wagon."

Mrs. Clinton's lips were dry. "How long ago?" she asked faintly.

"Ah reckon 'bout thutty minits. He jes' flang it on de wagon wid his pitchfork, and den he flang dem two packin' boxes on top of dat, and den he went along ter git udder folkses' trash."

That aristocrat of vases under the accumulated trash and garbage of blocks! As she walked quickly out of the kitchen, Jean's throat choked.

Her husband bumped into her in the butler's pantry and took her in his arms. Winters had told him of the disaster.

Tears were in Jean's eyes, but she managed a forlorn little smile.

"Suppose we give Nell one of the rugs, dear?" he suggested comfortingly. "Not the Bagdad carpet; that's your souvenir of the trip, and nobody shall have that except over my mummy. But what about the wine-red one? It has an especially good border. Or the antique with the star flowers, if you like?"

"After you were so pleased to find the Flower of Hinnai pattern!" Jean exclaimed reproachfully. Although Clinton had been elated over his purchase—a rug with the "starlike petals that brighten the mountains," which Mahomet had called "the chief flower of this world and the next"—he was willing to give it to Nell now.

How blessed it was to have a husband so sympathetic for any distress of his wife; how it took the sting out of a disappointment! She lifted her eyes to his with what he called the "dancing fairies" shining again in their brown depths.

"What a good sport you are, Jean!" he declared. "There never was anybody like you. The next time we go to Europe I'm going to find a vase for you, if I have to join an archaeological expedition or rob a museum!"

"Never mind me, dearest. It was Nell I was thinking about; she's the only one who has lost a vase. I can always keep my own perfect one, and it can't be stolen or broken or 'flang on de trash wagon,' for Keats himself gave mine to me."

Her voice was tender as she murmured the lovely lines:

"Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Leadest thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks in garlands drest?"

Then she paused and said impetuously:
"If only Nell doesn't put a shiny new silver vase in that niche!"

III

NELL's aunt was not the only person with benevolent intentions toward the Niche, as Jerry and Nell had begun to capitalize it in their thoughts. For Jerry had an aunt of his own, and a letter came from Jerry's Aunt Charlotte, announcing that she was coming down for a Christmas visit, and would bring a gift to put in "that curved place over the parlor mantelpiece."

"The saints preserve us—and speed up about it!" Jerry groaned. "I'll bet you five berries she brings that pickle jar that she adorned with sealing wax in dabby spots. It has been on her whatnot ever since I was a kid. Or maybe the stuffed owl, if it hasn't lost the rest of its feathers. Its head rivaled a bald eagle's the last time I saw it."

"Oh, she wouldn't!" his wife gasped.

"Well, Aunt Charlotte's an old dear, and I'm awfully fond of her, but she is—call it thrifty! When she wants to make a present she doesn't go to Ye Gift Shoppe to buy something; she hunts around in the china closet to see what she can spare the easiest. I'm her only nephew, and I used to have jolly times at her place when I was a kid, so I can't hurt her feelings; but it's a hundred to one shot that she'll bring something to the niche which will kill the room like knock-out drops."

"Oh, Jerry, what will we do?"

"Probably we'll have to shut it up, because there's no telling when she'll swoop down on us for a little visit, and she'll look for that damn pickle jar the first thing. There was an awful piece of imitation Wedgwood in her front room—a sort of sickly purple, and shaped like a champagne cooler—maybe she'll dump that on us. Wish I hadn't bought this house if I've got to live with that purplish Wedgwood or hurt the feelings of my oldest relative. Well, brace up, little one; time to go to the station to meet her."

Aunt Charlotte looked so old that it was

difficult for Nell to realize that Uncle Russell belonged to a preceding generation. Aunt Charlotte's was the sort of old age which seems to act as a drier and preservative, leaving her as wrinkled as a dried apple, but still quite spry.

After doing justice to Nell's appetizing luncheon, she announced in her chirruping voice: "I know you two are in a hurry to see your present, so we won't wait for Christmas Day. I brought it along instead of sending it, because it was quicker—not because express costs a very pretty penny in these days."

Jerry winked openly at his young wife.

Nell was feeling too dismal in spirit to return even a gleam. She was a serious little soul, and her new home was of paramount importance to her.

Aunt Charlotte produced a package stoutly wrapped in brown paper. No silly Christmas fixings for Aunt Charlotte! Nell braced herself mentally and tried to twist her lips into a smile of anticipation.

"How thoughtful of you, Aunt Charlotte." Her voice was mechanical. She felt like the drowning when sinking for the third time, and caught at a straw of hope: "I do hope it will fit the niche."

Maybe it wouldn't. If only it wouldn't!

"Oh, it 'll fit all right," the brisk old lady returned. "The niche was built for it. Uncle Russell set such store by it. You see, he was captain of a sailing vessel, and he went to China, and he did a big favor for an important Chinese. It was something private, because Uncle Russell never told anybody what it was. He was a Manchu or a Mongol prince or something like that which began with M—anyway, he was a high cockalorum, and he gave Jerry's Great-uncle Russell this present."

Aunt Charlotte took off the final newspaper wrapping and handed the vase to Nell.

It really wasn't nearly so bad as Nell had feared, although it was a queer shade of red she had never seen before. Still, red wasn't as awful as purple.

"Your Uncle Russell always called it his ox-blood vase. Unpleasant notion of his, wasn't it?" Aunt Charlotte continued placidly.

"*Sang de bœuf!*" cried Nell, who had been studying faithfully about pottery, even if she hadn't recognized the specimen. "Oh, Jerry, darling, can it really be?"

"Well, upon my soul!" Jerry's voice showed how keen was his pleasure. "If that isn't the very old vase that I got a spanking for meddling with when I was a kid! I never expected to see the day when I'd own it. Aunt Charlotte, this is an important day in my life." He carefully set the vase back in its old-time place in the niche.

"Make yourself at home, ox-blood!" he announced. "The place is yours!"

A shaft of light struck the vase, and the whole room seemed to focus on its rich, luscious color.

"Your uncle must have set a lot of store by it," Aunt Charlotte continued, "because he willed the full set of pink luster, with only one cup broken and one saucer chipped, to the sister he didn't get on with, and to my mother, who was his favorite sister, he willed that vase. That shows what he thought of it. Mother put it away in her china closet, and I've always done the same, except when this young man went after it, and for once in his days got the good whaling he deserved."

"Looks as if I cracked it a little," Jerry said with a grin, which deepened into a laugh when Nell took him seriously and explained:

"Oh, no, Jerry. That's what the books call 'barely perceptible crackle,' not cracks! Doesn't it look wonderful in its niche?"

"It does look pretty up there—mighty pretty," Aunt Charlotte replied, "if one can get the mind shed of that butcher shop notion of Uncle Russell's."

"He didn't originate the term," Nell began to explain eagerly, but a warning glance from Jerry indicated that Aunt Charlotte didn't like to have her statements challenged, so she went on hurriedly: "You are mighty generous to give it to us. Jerry and I are simply crazy over it."

"Tastes differ, but I'm glad you're pleased, child," the aged lady admitted.

Aunt Charlotte was vastly pleased herself. She had given her nephew and his wife a present which enchanted them, without having to disturb her snug little balance in the bank.

When Aunt Charlotte had gone to her room for a nap, Nell said meditatively to Jerry:

"From something my Aunt Jean said, or maybe it was the way she looked, I've got a hunch she is going to bring us some-

thing for the niche. Wouldn't it be dreadful if she did? For our *sang de bœuf* vase absolutely belongs there. I can see now why the Sheffield vase looked ordinary and parvenu. As you are Aunt Charlotte's only nephew, you can't hurt the old dear's feelings, but Aunt Jean is my very favorite aunt, and I just can't hurt hers, either."

"Your Aunt Jean isn't terrifying, Nell," Jerry remarked generously.

"You'll be keen for her, Jerry, when you know her better; she's so different from other people. She's vivid, somehow, like a girl who has good times. We'll keep Uncle Russell's vase in the niche always, except when Aunt Jean comes to visit us, and then we'll put in hers. But it does seem tricky, doesn't it?"

"Holy smoke, how you do cross bridges ahead of schedule! Probably your aunt will bring you a magenta scarf or a feather boa."

Nell shook her head. "You don't know her well yet. She'll never give me anything messy. And when she made me understand she was going to bring me a present, I knew it would have to be something exquisite."

When the rug arrived, Jerry and Nell were proud prophets, for Jerry had said it wouldn't be a vase, and Nell had predicted it would be "something exquisite," and the Oriental rug merited the term. Aunt Charlotte thought it looked slightly faded, and there was a worn place in it—so probably Nell's aunt had picked it up secondhand at a bargain—but she held her peace.

To wise Jean Clinton the lost vase was ancient history, gone into the place of discarded memories. Mr. Clinton had telephoned the "trash man" to search the dump pile to learn if by any miraculous chance the vase had escaped injury.

The man reported that there "wasn't no sign of a vase there, because the kids swoop down every time things are dumped out, trying to find broken chiny and such for their playhouses." Near the dump was an oak grove where the mill children used the exposed roots of trees for their playhouses, making walks and gardens bordered with bits of glass. The man searched there, too, but no vestige of the vase was to be found.

IV

It was little Sally Kimball who had spied the bundle of excelsior, and trudged off to

a quiet place to open it. Here was a treasure-trove!

It was a nice vase, broken in two, but if one could stick it together—what a perfectly gorg'us Christmas present it would make for mother! It was bigger than the vases in the ten-cent store.

If one just had money to buy glue! One used to have five cents 'most any time when daddy was home, but poor daddy had been put in jail, although he was perfectly innocent, so mother had to work in the factory.

Mums had told daddy to stay away from that pool room crowd, but daddy hadn't minded her, and now he was orful sorry, and he told her he was done for keeps when he got back home again—but that didn't give Sally five cents now. She screwed up her face, thinking hard, and wondered if the man at the mill store wouldn't give her just a little glue.

Sally started to cross the street, oblivious to everything but her new possession. She did not hear the honk of a small motor car, and its driver had to swerve sharply to avoid her, nearly going into the curbstone. He called out with some heat: "Watch your step! Trying to kill yourself? Shame on you!"

The girl with him expostulated gently: "Don't scold her, darling. See, the poor little thing has broken her vase. Stop a minute."

"It was all busted up when I found it on the dump pile," Sally explained confidently. Her hair was sandy, and her up-turned nose freckled, but there was an engaging friendliness about the child. "Have you got any glue, mister, so's I could mend it? Then it 'd do to give mums for Christmas."

"Hop right in, and maybe we can find your mums a whole one," the young man invited.

The girl's eyes beamed on him with pride and approbation. Surely the youth was thereby rewarded for his kindly impulse, as he and the girl had been engaged exactly three days.

Sally needed no second invitation. She directed them to the ten-cent store, and spent the whole silver dollar that the young man provided, and with an efficiency which surprised her new friends. Fifty cents went into new kitchen ware, ten cents for an iridescent vase of orange-colored glass, and there was still enough left for two blue

and white cups and saucers, and an artificial flower to pin on her mother's coat for state occasions.

"Mums won't burn her hand on that ole coffeepot or drink out of cracked cups this Christmas," Sally gloated. "And daddy's new cup 'll be there as soon as he gets home. And won't mums look like the rich folks in the movies, with a flower stuck in her coat! Look at it, lady, ain't it swell?"

In the meantime the two grown-ups had done some shopping on their own account, happy choosings with laughing consultations. Perhaps deep in their hearts was the thought of the magical days ahead when they would be doing Christmas shopping for their own children.

The girl was going to keep on teaching school until June, in order to save money for her trousseau, and the youth had been promised a promotion the first of the year, so they were to be married in the summer time. Actually to live together in a little flat of their own—it seemed too miraculous for belief!

They took Sally back to within a block of her home, telling her to hide away her gifts and to turn over the other packages to her mother.

"I bet they's presents for me," Sally remarked, hopefully. "I won't peek, but can I look at mums' right after she opens 'em? I can tell lots that way."

The girl gave laughing permission. Any of her school children would have explained that she was "easy," but they would have said it affectionately.

"Don't you want your broken vase, Sally?" she asked. She picked up the broken pieces, put them together, and for the first time regarded the vase. "Why, it's beautiful!"

"That ole thing!" Sally said with superb scorn. "I've got mums a brand new vase." Then a happy thought came to her, and she added eagerly:

"If you think it's nice, you take it for your Christmas gift—you and your husband, too."

The girl was touched and pleased, and the young man thought it funny and sweet and dear of her to keep an old broken vase because a poor child gave it to her.

"I like it," the girl declared, thoughtfully. "Somehow I like it better than any vase I ever saw in my life. We'll put it in our own home, and keep it always, be-

cause it's the very first thing ever given us together."

Her voice grew softer. "I can't explain, but doesn't the shape of it rest your eyes somehow? And the color—even on a cold, sleety day like this. Wouldn't the color make you feel that spring was on the way?"

The youth patted her arm. He loved that quick, breathless look of her, as if uplifted by sudden ecstasy—like that April day when they had come upon a meadow where violets seemed fairly romping; or last week when the sun struck the snow crystals on a clump of firs. What unimportant little things pleased her!

"We'll make the vase the keynote of our room, and we won't put in anything that isn't right with it," she went on. "I don't mind a little bareness—do you?—but I do hate to live with ugly things. Mother wants to fix her own room with new wicker and cretonne by the time we are married, and she has given me the old walnut pieces. Her grandfather was a cabinetmaker, and he made them with his own hands, and they're so honest and dignified."

This time the young man chuckled in spite of himself. "Honest and dignified"

were such funny words to apply to somewhat battered furniture!

V

So everybody concerned had the Christmas feeling! Jerry and Nell thought themselves the two luckiest people in the world, with the niche so admirably filled, and the wine-red rug shimmering on the floor.

Aunt Charlotte experienced the dual satisfaction of giving and keeping, for the bank balance was undisturbed. Mums and Sally had all those mysterious packages to open until their shabby room took on the radiance of yuletide joy.

The young man was loyally sure the Prince of Wales would have envied the dozen handkerchiefs the girl had hemstitched and monogrammed for him, and she had the epochal thrill of seeing an engagement ring sparkle on her slim finger.

And surely the vase, so skillfully patched that no cracks showed, had found the very home where it belonged. The lustered arabesques about the base were interlaced with this inscription in a language no longer written or spoken:

"Tarry thou with her to whom the gods have given the love of beauty."
